

was a very composed and reassuring person.

"Then allow me to show you. We are indeed fortunate that we can view it from the window." The Negro pulled back the heavy drapery, revealing an enormous window as the fourth wall. "I dare say that you will find our city beautiful," he added.

Clifford Webster again could not reply. He could only stare with unbelief at the scene before him. Beyond the window stretched a plaza fully two hundred yards in dimension, an architectural wonder of gardens and marble statues and fountains. On either side and at the end of the plaza lay three wide boulevards, lined with mansion after mansion of gleaming white or soft pink marble. The entire city was teeming with people of all ages, of all physical builds, of both sexes. All were Negro.

"Why, it's fantastic," exclaimed Webster, "utterly fantastic! Everyone here is colored! They're all niggers!"

"Is that so strange?" questioned the Counselor. "Have you not bothered to look at yourself?"

Trembling, Mr. Webster pulled off his gloves. He gasped. "I'm colored!" he screamed hysterically. "I'm a nigger!"

"You are indeed," the Counselor agreed, as he turned again to gaze upon the city.

"What's going on here, anyhow?" Webster's voice cracked with rage. "Is this your idea of a joke? Well, is it?"

Shaking his head sadly, the Counselor spoke. "I see that the time has come when I must tell you the truth, Mr. Webster. You see, three days ago, after you returned to your apartment a bankrupt man, you died of a heart attack." He paused. "You were buried, following tradition, in Memorial Cemetery—and, I might add, with quite a display of mourning from your friends. The moment your coffin came to rest upon the earth, you found yourself knocking at my door, here in this beautiful city . . . in Heaven, Mr. Webster."

June Balm*

Carla Harris

Sunset Lane, Bloomington

JUNE 20, 19—. I have had what I believe to be the most remarkable day in my life, and while the events are still fresh in my mind, I shall try to record them in my pocket secretary.

To begin, I am James Clarence Withencroft, forty years old, and have always enjoyed perfect health. By profession I am an artisan, designing and repairing jewelry in my own small shop, and I make enough money to satisfy my simple needs. My aging mother, whom I supported for many years, passed on last autumn, leaving me alone in this world and independent.

I opened my shop at nine this morning, and after glancing through

* A parody on *August Heat*, by W. F. Harvey.

the morning paper, put on my jeweler's glass to see what overlooked details might keep my entry in the International Jewelry Design Competition from being a prize-winner.

The shop, though both back and front door were open, was oppressively humid, and I had just made up my mind that a more comfortable place would be the deep end of the public swimming pool, when inspiration came.

I began to etch minute characters on the inner rim of my entry, which addition was the final touch needed to complete the ultimate in betrothal rings. So intent was I on my work that I forgot to go out for lunch, and stopped only when the chapel clock struck four. Just time to get the entry wrapped and in the mail before the post office closed!

The final result, for a competitive design in jewelry, was, I felt sure, the best thing I had done. The ring was wide—enormously wide. The jewels hung in scrolls at center front, creased into the rich chunky gold. The band was polished, almost shiny; the scrolls clasped the jewels casually, conveying a feeling not so much of strength as of utter, absolute exuberance. There seemed nothing in the world malevolent enough to abrogate that knot of betrothal.

I wrapped up the ring, and, without quite knowing why, placed it in my left breast pocket. Then, with the rare sense of happiness which the knowledge of a good thing well done gives, I left the shop.

I set out hurriedly for the post office, fully conscious of the need to make sure that my precious entry was properly registered and in the mail to the Design Competition.

I remember walking along Lytton Street and turning to the right along Gilchrist Road at the bottom of the hill, where the men were at work on the new storm sewers. From there onward, I have only the vaguest recollections of where I went. The pervasive humidity came up from the dusty asphalt until I longed for the thunder promised by the great banks of copper-colored cloud that hung low over the western sky.

I must have walked five or six squares before I roused from my reverie as a small boy asked me the time. It was twenty minutes to five. After he walked on, I began to take stock of my whereabouts. I found myself standing in front of the window of a neighborhood bakery, garishly lit in the softly falling dusk. The window was bordered by trays of sugary pastries: cream puffs, napoleon slices, cinnamon rolls. In the center was a huge wedding cake in tiers topped by two dancing figures, a gray-haired bride in traditional white and a portly, balding groom. From inside the shop came a cheery whistle, and the brisk sound of broom meeting dust pan. A sudden impulse made me enter.

A woman was sweeping, with her back toward me. She turned at the sound of my steps and stopped short. I glanced back at the wedding cake. The tiny doll was a portrait of this woman, from the neatly turned waist to the lively gray hair. Then I looked at the

little man. He greeted me smiling; it was as though I were looking in a mirror.

I apologized for my intrusion. "That's an unusual cake in your window. I missed my lunch and suddenly must have got hungry."

She shook her head. "In a way it is," she answered. "The surface is as delectable as anything you could wish, but the inside's a trifle heavy. It really wasn't made for eating."

"Then what's it for?" I asked.

The woman burst out laughing. "You'd hardly believe me if I was to tell you it's for exhibition, but it's the truth. Artists have exhibitions: so do bakers." She went on to talk of cakes and decoration, which sort stood up best and which were easiest to work. At the end of every other sentence, she would set down her broom and dab at the perspiration on her shiny forehead.

I said little, for I felt uneasy. There was something unnatural, uncanny, in meeting this woman.

I tried at first to persuade myself that she had seen me before, that my face, unknown to her, had found a place in some out-of-the-way corner of her memory. I put on my glasses, trying to persuade myself that perhaps the face of the man on the wedding cake did not resemble mine after all.

For the first time, I read the inscription around the lower tier of the cake: "James Clarence Withencroft and June Atkinson . . . betrothed June 20, 19—." For some time I stood in silence. Then a cold shudder ran down my spine. I asked her where she had seen the names.

"Oh, I didn't see them anywhere," she replied. "I needed two names, so I put down mine and the first man's name that came into my head. Why do you want to know?"

"It's a strange coincidence, but you happened to use my name."

She giggled. "And today's the day."

But she knew only the half of it. I told her of my morning's work. I took the ring from my pocket, unwrapped it, and showed it to her. She strained to read the fine engraving: "June betrothed to James, 6/20/19—." As she looked, the expression on her cheerful face altered until she appeared to be seeing ghosts.

"Well, June is such a common name," she said. "The month for brides, and everything."

"And you must have seen me in my shop sometime and forgotten it."

She shook her head. She had just moved to Bloomington. We were silent for some time. She tentatively slipped the ring on her finger. It was no surprise that it fit. Shivering, she started to take off the ring.

A reverberating cannonade of thunder announced the charging rain. Sudden wind blew the door shut, and as suddenly the lights in the bakery flickered and went out.

"I'll get a candle," she said. "You may wait here if you like,

until the storm passes over."

She set a candle on a little table in the back room. She brought two cans of beer and some cheese from the refrigerator, and took a loaf of bread from under the counter. "You said that you'd forgotten to eat lunch. Perhaps this will help."

As I drank the beer and gratefully munched on bread and cheese, we resumed the conversation which nature had so rudely interrupted.

"You must excuse my asking," I said, "but is there no other man you could have put on your wedding cake?"

She shook her head. "I'm not married; I took care of my ailing father until he was buried last month. And the romances of my youth, as I remember them, would look young and foolish dancing with a gray-haired bride," she added as an afterthought.

She got up, fetched two more beers from the cooler. "The rain will be wonderful for the flowers. Pity you didn't make the post office in time. Where do you live?"

I told her my address. It would take an hour's quick walk to get home.

"It's like this," she said. "We'll look at the matter straight. If you go back home tonight, you'll get drenched to the skin. You might catch yourself a wicked spring cold, or even the pneumonia. And you said there's no one to look after you." She spoke with an intense seriousness that would have been laughable six hours before. But I did not laugh.

"The best think we can do," she continued, "is to make you comfortable here. I have a little room in back, and some extra bedding. If the rain doesn't let up, we'll fix you a place to sleep."

To my surprise, I agreed.

I am writing by candlelight at the little table. June brought me another beer before going to her room to get out of her uniform. She evidently opened a window in back, and the air is breezing in, cool, moist, and exhilarating. It is still raining, though not quite so hard.

It is almost eleven now. In an hour, this remarkable day will be over.

But the beer has me swirling.

It is enough to send a man to bed.

Clouds

Jane Cox

SINCE the beginning of time, the clouds which drift majestically over and around the earth have exercised a profound influence upon the lives and thoughts of men. The ancient Greeks, according to Greek mythology, worshipped Zeus, the god who, when angry, would gather the clouds together and hurl bolts of lightning smashing to the ground. In the *Koran*, it is written that "God gently driveth forward the clouds, and gathereth them together and then layeth